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ABSTRACT

Print sources of government information often are discontinued and replaced with either a CD ROM or Internet version, leaving the information seeker access to the documents only if they have technological ability. A more cohesive government information policy could remedy these and related problems. Libraries and the public may not be ready financially to make the shift to electronic information. Thirty-three academic, public, and special libraries in eastern New Mexico were surveyed to illustrate the technological isolation of eastern New Mexico. Of the 23 libraries that completed surveys: (1) two are selective federal depository libraries--both have text based Internet access and CD ROM capabilities, one provides Internet access to faculty and staff only; (2) four have Internet access and CD ROM capabilities; (3) two have CD ROM capabilities and plan to be on the Internet by year end; and (4) 15 have no Internet access, and seven libraries of this group have no CD ROM capabilities. When patrons request materials the libraries do not have, libraries either send the patron to a local selective depository, order the materials through interlibrary loan from the regional depository library, or purchase them if they are deemed to be high use potential. Based on the results of the survey, a majority of the participating libraries would not be able to adequately fill document requests if only electronic government information was available. The Depository Library Program is the taxpayer's interface with the information the government produces. If this access point disappears, eastern New Mexicans would be left to their own devices to obtain important government information. (SWC)

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GOVERNMENT INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

Implications for Libraries and Communities in Eastern New Mexico

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Whether it is praising the "interconnectedness" we will all soon supposedly enjoy or condemning the darker side of commerce the it is accused of encouraging, it is hard to get through a newscast or a newspaper without hearing something about the Internet. Librarians, with all their resistance to change in the past, seem to have jumped on the bandwagon as well, which could lead to problems with public access to information if this enthusiasm is not tempered with reason. In this paper I hope to address issues affecting access to government information on the Internet and how this shift toward electronic dissemination effects an isolated region such as eastern New Mexico.

In his article "Librarians, Self-Censorship and Information Technologies" (1994), John Buschman voices appropriate concern over librarians' rush to embrace new technologies at the expense of books and other print materials, which might in the end be more useful. "Self-censorship can be thought of not as not assessing, estimating, or judging some of the dimensions of our library decisions - our socially constructed proscriptions and prescriptions - thereby leaving assumptions unexamined and some results unchecked for the public we serve" (p. 221). Buschman contends that this unexamined approach to technology is due to the higher cultural status of electronic resources. He claims that "certain kinds of knowledge (scientific, measurable, profitable) have a social prestige and more weight as true knowledge," and continues, "as a result of their natural affiliation with scientific rationality, information technologies hold a very high status in our culture" (p. 222). Librarians, according to this logic, will be more willing to invest in an expensive networking project or set of databases rather than keeping up the collection of monographic or other print materials, if the technological project is seen to have more prestige. The assumption is that access to information is more important than the ownership of a physical product. In terms of the Internet, this might not always be the case. To have access to the Internet is not to have all of the information you might want at your fingertips.

In terms of government information, print sources go out of existence and are replaced with either a CD or an Internet site without notifying the public, in particular depository librarians of the shift. This leaves it up to the information seeker to find the material if they have the technological ability to do so in the first place. These types of problems could be remedied with a more cohesive government information policy. Agencies such as the Government Printing Office are making efforts in this direction, but libraries and the public might not be ready financially, to make this shift to electronic information.

Unfortunately, information policy at the federal level is complex and not always made with the end-user in mind. It is a collection of many policy documents from every branch of the government. These different policies are not coordinated in many cases leading to competition and duplication. Government information policies are important to libraries in that libraries are part of the larger community of government information providers. In the case of depository libraries, their very existence and the materials they can choose from are dictated by federal information policy.

The Federal Depository Library Program established through Title 44 of the U.S. Code in 1895 is the information policy which provides the Federal Government with the means to disseminate government information to the

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taxpayers who fund its production. The program unctions by distributing these publications, free of charge, to approximately 1,400 Depository Libraries through the Government Printing Office (GPO). These libraries then provide free public access to the information to the communities in which they reside.

Over the past decade, discussion of electronic information and the way it should be treated in terms of a product disseminated by the GPO has been the topic of a sometimes heated debate. Once electronic information began to appear in force on the Internet and was considered official government information, the library community as well as other groups praised this newfound access.

In her article "Uncle Sam Online: Government Information on the Internet," Susan M. Ryan states "the Internet, which makes government information available to the consumer the minute that it is posted, has begun to provide the mechanism by which the public can have instantaneous access to the data produced by their government" (1994, p. 151). Blake Gumprecht was equally excited about the prospects of the Internet as the mode of dissemination for government information when he stated, "a variety of other proposals suggest that in the future an ever increasing volume of government information will be available online, sometimes exclusively" (1994, p. 19).

Eventually, doubts about the efficacy of the Internet began to surface. Amy Schatz of the Wall Street Journal questioned the value of the information that actually makes it online. "After a look at what Uncle Sam has dumped out in Cyberspace, however, the public may decide to keep its distance from the new electronic democracy," she continues, "when deciding what information to put online, departments and agencies are hardly selective" (1995, B1:1). Some sites are so technologically advanced, including graphics, audio and video clips that few homes or libraries have the equipment to handle them (Browning, 1994). There is duplication as well. The House Information Service provides much of the same information as the Thomas system spearheaded by Newt Gingrich through the Library of Congress and the mandated GPO Access System of the Government printing office. With more coordination, this duplication and ultimately this waste of funds could be avoided.

Simply stated, even if one has access to the Internet, it might not give as much access as the user might hope. While many Depository libraries with Internet access have their own locators, the federally mandated Government Information Locator Service or GILS, which promises to ve the one-stop locator for government information on the Internet, is still in its test phase.

Electronic information is cheaper to produce, takes up less space and is generally a more effective format for searching certain databases and indexes. On the other hand, the "fully-burdened price" (Crawford & Gorman, 1995, p. 99) of electronic information, including the costs of equipment are higher than traditional print formats. In order to effectively implement electronic information as a resource in a library, the institution needs to have the funds for equipment such as networked workstations, LAN software and hardware, and CD-ROM towers. This is an ongoing cost as equipment needs to be upgraded and sources replaced as technology changes.

In the case of Eastern New Mexico University, the library is one of the last buildings to be networked due to the concrete structure of the library, thus prolonging our transition from text based access to the Internet to a graphical mode. The terminals we do have are not workstations so to speak, and are not windows compatible. As a result, when the building is networked, we will have to invest in workstations for the reference area to give access to our new capability.

Even with these hindrances, the trend in the dissemination of government information is toward electronic media. In fact legislation considered by Congress this term would have effectively shut down the production of print materials to be distributed to the Depository Libraries. During the week of June 18,1995, the House approved a cut that halved the budget of the Government Printing Office. The costs of printing materials from the various departments and agencies would have been shifted to the agency that produced the publication, rather than the GPO. The agencies themselves are already dealing with cuts and most likely would not have the funds to produce the additional runs of publications to be distributed to Depository Libraries. Funding for the dissemination of electronic products from Executive Branch agencies would have been included in the legislation, but no provision for the printing of important documents such as the Congressional Record and the Federal Register had been made.

The bill did not pass in the Senate and the proposed cuts were not made. In response t o this legislative development, the Government Printing Office is engaging in a study to show how the migration to electronic dissemination could be accomplished while ensuring public access to this information. The issue will return again and again in the name of downsizing government. One proposed remedy to the lack of Internet access by individuals has been to put government information kiosks in post offices. Libraries in this proposal have been deemed to be so out of the technological loop that the government is considering a bypass of the already standing public information system. Proponents of this system hope that agencies will be able to save money by carrying out transactions online. The savings would be used to fund the infrastructure of the program. In their article "The Post Office and Public Libraries," Jean Armour Polly and Steve Cisler contend that "advocates of kiosks assume that little assistance will be needed," and continue "those of us who have worked with OPACS (online public access catalogs), audiovisual equipment, and especially the photocopy machines in public places know that the introduction of even bullet-proof, easy-to-use, well-designed technological devices presents new challenges for the public services staff" (1995, p. 30). In theory, the combination of the equipment headache and the postal service could be disastrous.

Eastern New Mexico tax payers have every reason to watch this debate closely. Depository Libraries are few and far between and are struggling to keep up with the influx of electronic media under the current system. To illustrate the technological isolation of the region of eastern New Mexico, I conducted a survey of academic, public and special libraries. Of the thirty-three questionnaires that were distributed, twenty-three returned completed surveys giving a response rate of 69%. Based on these responses, I have made generalizations for the whole group.

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Of the group, two are selective federal depository libraries, meaning that they select only a percentage of the items available through the depository program. One of these libraries selects 43% and the other approximately 15%. Both have Internet access which was text based at the time of the survey, with plans to upgrade to a graphical interface sometime during the academic year. Both libraries have CD-ROM capabilities as well. One of the libraries only provides Internet access to faculty and staff, hoping to expand service to all patrons next semester. If they do not have a publication that is requested, they get the print materials through interlibrary loan from the regional depository library, which receives and retains everything distributed through the Depository Program.

Of the remaining twenty-one respondents, four have Internet access. One of these four has a graphical interface such as Netscape. All of these have CD-ROM capabilities. If they do not have the materials requested, they get them through interlibrary loan from a regional depository or a local selective depository.

Two of the remaining seventeen libraries plan to be on the Internet by the end of the year. One of these will have modem access to the Internet and a text-based interface and the other plans to be hardwired with a graphical interface if they get funding for new workstations.
Both of these libraries have CD-ROM capabilities. If they do not have the materials, they either send the patron to the local selective depository or request the materials through interlibrary loan.

The remaining fifteen respondents have no Internet access at all. Seven of this group have no CD-ROM capabilities. If they do get a request for a government publication they request the item through interlibrary loan, refer patrons to local depositories or purchase the item if it is deemed to be of high use potential.

Based on the results of this survey, it seems obvious that a majority of the participating libraries would not be able to adequately fill documents requests if only electronic government information was available. If the GPO was to lose its printing capacity for the depository library program, and shift to only electronic dissemination, these libraries might not follow along with the transition. In terms of interlibrary loan for these libraries, the depository or other lending institution would have to access the materials, print them and then send it to the requesting library. Aside from the ecological costs of reprinting an item every time it is requested, the real cost of paper and ink to libraries would be considerable (Crawford & Gorman, 1995).

The Depository Library Program is the tax payer's interface with the information the government produces. If this access point disappears or is made inaccessible, eastern New Mexicans would be left up to their own devices to obtain this important information. Census data shows that New Mexico is second on the list of states that have households without telephones, surpassed only by Mississippi. One in eight New Mexico households lack telephones. The median household income of the state is also well below the national average (Bureau of the Census, 1994). Assuming that these households have computers, there would be no way for them to access the information distributed over the Internet. It is more likely that these households are without computers as well, which would leave them isolated from this valuable information.

Unless Newt Gingrich's deficit enhancing proposal to give a tax credit to allow America's poor to buy their own personal laptop and follow the rest of us into the 21st century is realized, the technological have-nots, including many New Mexicans will become increasingly disenfranchised from the workings of the Federal government (Kinsley, 1995). It is important, then, for librarians and information professionals to lobby policy makers to keep the lowest common denominator of government information dissemination accessible to all Americans.

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